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Zoning code to allow arts district

BY TANIA VALDEMORO

Artists and people who work in cultural arts organizations are one step closer to having the opportunity to work and live in South Beach on their modest incomes.

The city's Planning Board on Wednesday approved a package of zoning incentives that arts supporters hope will lure developers to the general area of the Collins Park neighborhood.

There, developers will be able to rehabilitate existing buildings or construct new ones that contain smaller residential units than typically allowed under the zoning code if they set aside a portion of those properties for commercial work spaces or affordable rentals or condos for artists and cultural arts workers.

"I think this is really critical to the future of retaining artists and growing the arts community," said Cathy Leff, director of the Wolfsonian-FIU Museum and a member of the Planning Board.

The City Commission is expected to approve the zoning incentives for the area, known as the Cultural Arts Neighborhood District Overlay, or CANDO for short, at its Sept. 5 meeting.

The district is bounded by 24th Street and North Lincoln Lane to the north, Meridian and Lenox avenues on the west, South Lincoln Lane on the south and the Atlantic Ocean to the east.

To qualify for work space or affordable housing in the district, people will have to prove they are artists or work for a cultural arts organization and have incomes that fall between 51 and 120 percent of the median income in Miami-Dade, which is \$55,900 this year.

According to Assistant City Manager Hilda Fernandez, 40 percent of Miami Beach's workforce is cultural arts and hospitality workers who make at least \$22,000. Another 20 percent of the workforce, composed of education and healthcare workers, make about \$41,000.

"This is not about providing housing for artists who make six figures," she said.

The board's approval marked a victory for outgoing Miami Beach Mayor David Dermer, who introduced his proposal for the district during his April 2006 state of the city address.

"I am very pleased to see this happen," Dermer said Thursday, referring to the unanimous approval of the board's vote.

"Rarely does a city set forth initiatives that invite artists back into a community. I feel that that is truly unique about this proposal," he said.

"I believe there will be a lot of residents and businesses that will want to be in the district."

Still, there are some details, board members said, that need tweaking. For example, planning board members grilled Robert Wennett and other members of Dermer's Blue Ribbon Committee on the definition of "artist."

They want to make sure developers and potential tenants have a clearer idea about who as an "artist" can qualify for affordable housing.

In response, Fernandez, told the board that city staff would define the term more specifically by the Sept. 5 commission meeting.

Meanwhile, some people suggested further changes to the proposed zoning rules of the district.

"It's a very good start, but I don't think it gives enough incentives for developers to come in," said Michael Larkin, an attorney representing G2 Developers.

To successfully lure developers, Larkin suggested raising building heights in the district from five to seven feet, and allowing retail, restaurant and art gallery uses in the ground floor spaces of buildings.

Wennett invited Larkin to present those ideas again at the next Blue Ribbon Committee meeting.

One critic who blasted the CANDO initiative was David Kelsey, president of the South Beach Hotel and Restaurant Association.

"I think our primary needs are affordable hotel rooms and increasing workforce housing," Kelsey said.

"Our economy is based on tourism. To me, this seems like a misplaced priority."